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ABSTRACT

Forty-nine introductory psychology students (28 female, 21 male) at the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University in Utah were tested to determine the effects of a pro-feminist, pro-Equal Rights Amendment demonstration by the Utah Women's Rights Movement on attitudes toward the women's movement, civil demonstrations, and Mormon Church leaders. Subjects completed a 30 item Likert-type questionnaire one week before the civil demonstration and again one week after. An analysis of covariance revealed a significant overall increase in negative attitudes toward the women's movement, with women showing a particularly significant negative shift. An overall negative change in attitudes towards civil demonstration in general was also noted although no significant sex differences were detected. Attitudes towards Mormon Church leaders remained unchanged. It is concluded that subjects experienced a boomerang effect in that their prior negative attitudes towards the women's movement and civil demonstrations were strengthened by persuasive attempts intended to have the opposite effect. Suggestions are offered so that boomerang effects can be avoided in the future. Test data are summarized in two tables. (Author/LP)

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Some Affects of Women's Rights Demonstrations Upon Attitudes of Nonfeminist Mormons

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Running head: Women's Rights Demonstrations

Some Affects of Women's Rights Demonstrations

Upon Attitudes of Nonfeminist Mormons

Abstract

Forty-nine introductory psychology students (28 female, 21 male) at the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah were tested to see what affects a pro-feminist, pro-ERA demonstration had upon their attitudes toward the Women's Movement, civil demonstrations and Mormon Church leaders. Subjects completed a 30-item Likert-type questionnaire one week before the demonstration and again one week after. An analysis of covariance revealed a significant overall increase in negative attitudes toward the Women's Movement ($p < .001$), with women showing a very significant negative shift ($p < .01$). Although an overall negative change in attitudes toward civil demonstrations was noted ($p < .01$), no significant sex differences were detected. Attitudes toward Mormon Church leaders remained unchanged. It is concluded that subjects experienced a "boomerang" effect in that their prior negative attitudes toward the Women's Movement and civil demonstrations were strengthened by persuasive attempts that were intended to have an opposite effect. Suggestions are offered so that such boomerang effects can be avoided in the future.

Some Affects of Women's Rights Demonstrations
Upon Attitudes of Nonfeminist Mormons[1]

Civil demonstrations have always been an integral part of the Women's Movement. From the days of Anne Hutchinson, challenger of male pastoral authority in 17th century Massachusetts,[2] to the present time when thousands of feminists are fighting for sexual equality under the U.S. Constitution, active protest has been seen as a sure method to bring about such equality. Good evidence suggests that civil protest helped women gain suffrage in 1920,[3] and with hopes of a successful outcome, feminists of the Seventies and Eighties have pursued the civil protest strategy in achieving the Movement's current goals.

But what happens when civil demonstrations backfire and actually strengthen preexisting nonfeminist attitudes? And more importantly, how can we diagnose when conditions are ripe for such effects so that we don't wind up strengthening attitudes we want to change? This is the central issue which we address in this paper.

On October 22, 1976, the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church) placed itself at odds with the Women's Movement by officially opposing ERA. Their brief statement claimed that the Amendment would: (1) strike at the family, (2) rob women of their femininity, (3) bring restraint, and (4) bring repression.[4] This official Church pronouncement reiterated the conservative theme of other Church leaders. For instance, Mormon Apostle Thomas Monson argued that feminist women who seek fulfillment outside of the home have lost their true identity and have followed the "Pied

Piper of Sin."[5] Similarly, Mormon leader William Critchlow declared in a Church conference that, where men and women are concerned, men are the "first among equals."[6]

Upset by such statements, which many Utah as well as nationally located feminists believed to be inaccurate concerning ERA and male-female relationships,[7] leaders of the Utah Women's Rights Movement planned a series of civil demonstrations to coincide with the Mormon Church's semiannual conferences in Salt Lake City. Beginning in April 1980, feminists converged upon Temple Square, site of the Church meetings, chanting and carrying placards to protest the Church's anti-ERA involvement. At the October 1980 Church conference, three determined members of Mormons for ERA--Cheryl Dalton, Sarah Campbell and Marty LaBrosse--audibly voted against Church leaders in protest of the Church's anti-ERA stance. "We have seized our one opportunity to voice our conscience to the First Presidency," the women said in a public statement to the press.[8] And though the women were able to confer with a leading Church official (not Spencer Kimball, the President of the Church), the three women's position was largely ignored.[9]

As each demonstration occurred in April and October from 1980 to 1982, we collected anecdotal evidence from active Mormons about what affects these demonstrations were having upon Church members. It was clear from this evidence that the demonstrations were not changing Church members' attitudes toward Mormonism, but were promoting further negative feelings toward the Women's Movement. The purpose of our study was to see if these observations could be empirically supported.

Method

Subjects and Design. The subjects were 49 introductory psychology students

(28 female, 21 male) at the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. The subjects participated in the experiment for extra credit toward their final grade in the course. Only Mormons who attended Sunday Mormon Church meetings at least three times a month (that is, "active" Mormons) and who classified themselves as nonfeminists were included in the analysis.

A one group pretest-posttest design was used to test each subject's attitude change from pretest to posttest. Although not the optimal design for most experimental situations, this type of design was used because it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a control group of active Mormons who had not at least heard of the demonstrations. Each demonstration over the two-year period, including the one in October 1982, received statewide media coverage.

Apparatus. A 30-item Likert-type questionnaire was used to measure the three dependent variables: (1) attitudes toward the Women's Movement, (2) attitudes toward civil demonstrations, and (3) attitudes toward Mormon Church leaders at both the local and general level. Two dummy dependent variables--attitudes toward the Civil Rights Movement and toward patriotism--were also included in the questionnaire to reduce any possible demand characteristics.

Procedure. Upon being recruited for the experiment, the subjects were told that they would be participating in a study designed to assess the reliability of a new social issues questionnaire that was still in its developmental stage. When the subjects arrived for the pretest, one week before the October 1982 demonstration, the nature of assessing experimental reliability was briefly described. The first author told the subjects that the objective of the study was to see if the new questionnaire measured attitudes consistently over a given number of administrations. Therefore, subjects were told they would have to

return in about two weeks to take the posttest. At the beginning of the posttest session, in order to make the women's rights demonstration of the week before more salient, the subjects were introduced to the second author and were told that he was also doing research on social issues. Subjects were told that he was doing a study on the quality of newspaper articles that dealt with current social issues and was comparing articles published in Utah newspapers with those published in other parts of the United States. Each subject was given a copy of six newspaper articles to read, the last two dealing directly with the women's rights demonstration held the week before in Salt Lake City, and then completed a 12-item questionnaire about the articles they read. Subjects then completed the original 30-item questionnaire for the second time and were fully debriefed.

Results

Responses were summed for each of the three dependent variables and a mean was calculated for every subject on each dependent variable for both the pretest and posttest. These means are reported in Table 1. A score of 1.0 represents

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Insert Table 1 about here

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the most favorable position, while 7.0 indicates the most negative. Table 1 shows that males were relatively stable in their attitude toward the Women's Movement, while females' attitudes became much more negative. An analysis of covariance revealed that these changes were statistically significant, F (1,45) = 6.61, $p < .01$ (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

When the 49 subjects were analyzed as an overall group, their collective attitude toward the Women's Movement shifted dramatically toward a more negative position, F (1,45) = 21.93, $p < .001$. Overall attitudes towards civil demonstrations also shifted significantly in the negative direction, F (1,45) = 9.24, $p < .01$. No sex differences were noted. Subjects' attitudes toward Mormon Church leaders remained unchanged.

A postexperimental questionnaire showed that none of the subjects were familiar with the first author's activity in the Utah Women's Rights Movement.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see what affects a pro-feminist, pro-ERA demonstration had upon the attitudes of active nonfeminist Mormons. We have empirically shown that the demonstration actually promoted negative attitudes in the subjects, not only toward the Women's Movement, but also toward civil demonstrations, one of the Movement's primary methods of persuasion.

Actually, such "boomerang" effects occur frequently in persuasion attempts. As Carl Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold Kelley note:

> . . . Arousal and alleviation of emotional tension may . . . be involved in many instances where persuasive communications produce aggression or other unintended (boomerang) effects. . . . When a communicator arouses anger or resentment by making statements which are regarded as offensive, the audience tends to develop unfavorable attitudes toward the groups, enterprises and goals with which he [sic] is identified.[10]

It seems clear, then, that the October 1982 demonstration aroused some degree of anger or resentment in the 49 Mormons tested in our study. But why did such boomerang effects occur? And what can feminists do to avoid such counterproductive results in the future?

First, any attempts to change institutionally anchored attitudes, such as those of Mormons against ERA, should remain the subjects' latitude of acceptance. As defined by psychologists Richard Petty and John Cacioppo, this latitude "includes the person's most preferred position, but also includes the range of other opinions on an issue that the person finds acceptable."[11] However, the persuasive message of the demonstration seemed clearly in the subjects' latitude of rejection, which consists of the range of opinions about an issue that a person objects to and cannot accept, that sensitive area where attempts to persuade induce anger and actually strengthen preexisting attitudes.[12] Conclude Petty and Cacioppo, "Whether or not the advocated position of a communication falls within a person's latitude of acceptance or rejection will thus be a primary determinant of whether or not persuasion will occur."[13]

A second way to reduce boomerang effects is to not arouse cognitive dissonance in those you are trying to persuade.[14] If Mormons who favor traditional sex-role behavior in women, such as extreme nurturance and nonaggressiveness, observe women who violate these expectations by being outspoken and assertive--especially in a Church setting, where women have a subordinate leadership role--then these Mormons will probably experience cognitive dissonance, a mental tension caused by maintaining two incompatible beliefs. To reduce the dissonance, the discomfort, it is much easier for these Mormons to reaffirm their negative attitudes about outspoken and assertive women than it is for them to reorganize their sex role and religious orientations. Therefore, attempts to persuade that arouse large amounts of cognitive dissonance will probably be unsuccessful.

Again, the solution seems to be in keeping the discrepancy between current attitudes and prospective attitudes small in those whom you are trying to persuade.

Over time, as attitudes change, more meaty feminist doctrine can be presented. Under such circumstances, it would probably meet with much less resistance.

We have no foolproof explanations about why women in our study grew much more negative in their attitudes toward the Women's Movement than men did. Our best guess is that women in traditional sex roles have a greater investment in the status quo than women who go beyond these roles. If the many egalitarian goals advocated by the Women's Movement were to become reality, perhaps these traditionally oriented women would feel obligated to make major, unwanted changes in their lives. Explaining the negative shift for men in attitudes toward civil demonstrations could be done in much the same way. If men who favor traditional sex roles observe these being violated in a civil demonstration, they may likewise feel obligated to make unwanted changes in their lives if non-traditional sex roles became the norm. Again, this is conjecture.

Now we do not want to leave the impression that our study proves that civil demonstrations are a futile way of gaining equal rights. We are suggesting no such thing. We are suggesting, however, that such demonstrations may not be the best way to promote favorable feminist attitudes in all situations. Perhaps there are times, such as in dealing with Mormons and other staunch nonfeminists, when a soft-sell, nonoffensive approach works best. Conversely, when the targets of feminists demonstrations are already somewhat favorable to ERA and the Women's Movement, then we would predict the demonstration to have positive effects.

Finally, we have to wonder what a replication of our study would reveal if is was conducted now, well after the June 30, 1982 ratification deadline for ERA. Perhaps ERA and the Women's Movement itself have ceased to exist as bona fide issues for many Mormons. However erroneous such a position might be, we suspect that

a demonstration, such as the one held in October 1982, would not have a boomerang effect upon a group of nonfeminist Mormons. They would likely dismiss the demonstration and its message instead of give it serious consideration.

Notes

[1]This paper is based upon a presentation given at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association in San Francisco on April 30, 1983.

[2]June Sochen, Herstory: A Record of the American Woman's Past, 2nd ed. (Sherman Oaks, California: Alfred Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 41-43.

[3]Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States, revised ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1975), pp. 145-345.

[4]Official Mormon Church statement by Spencer Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner and Marion G. Romney, the First Presidency of the Mormon Church, cited in The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Magazine, 1980), p. 21. Mormon Apostle Bruce McConkie, in his most recent book The Millennial Messiah (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1982, p. 60), seems to castigate Mormons who support ERA by writing that there are Church members "who refuse to follow the Brethren [the First Presidency] on moral issues, lest their . . . political rights be infringed . . . ."

[5]Thomas S. Monson, "The Women's Movement: Liberation of Deception?" Ensign, 1, no. 1 (January 1971), p. 18.

[6]William J. Critchlow, "Women and the Priesthood," Improvement Era, 68, no. 12 (December 1965), p. 1121.

[7]Two good feminist perspectives are Mary Delsman's Everything You Need to Know About ERA (Riverside, California: Meranza Press, 1975) and Riane Eisler's The Equal Rights Handbook (New York: Avon, 1978).

[8] "ERA Backers Vote Against LDS Leaders," Salt Lake Tribune, 5 October 1980, p. A6.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold H. Kelley, Communication and Persuasion (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 63.

[11]Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, Attitudes and Persuasion: Classic and Contemporary Approaches (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1982), p. 101.

[12]Ibid., pp. 101-102.

[13]Ibid., p. 103.

[14]Many sources refer to cognitive dissonance theory. Among the best are Leon Festinger's A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), and Elliot Aronson's "The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Current Perspective," cited in Leonard Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, volume 4 (New York: Academic Press, 1969), pp. 1-34.

[15]Social psychologist David Myers offers an excellent synopsis of discrepancy affects on persuasion in his book Social Psychology (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), pp. 269-271.

Table 1

Pretest and Posttest Means for Males and Females

Means	Women's Movement	Civil Demonstrations	Church Authorities
	Males		
Pretest	4.04	3.33	1.67
Posttest	3.95	3.74	1.77
	Females		
Pretest	4.10	3.74	1.52
Posttest	5.07	3.75	1.58

Table 2

Summary of F Tests

Value	Women's Movement	Civil Demonstrations	Church Authorities
		Overall	
F	21.93	9.24	.15
p	.001	.01	n.s.
		Sex Differences	
F	6.61	.60	.39
p	.01	n.s.	n.s.